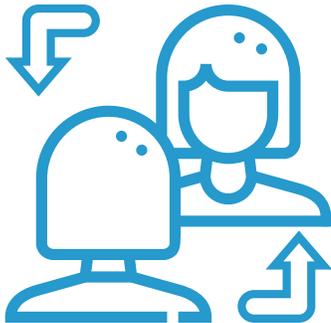


# Empathic Strain

In recent years, we have seen an increase in frontline health-care workers reporting feelings of burnout, secondary trauma and empathic strain. While research on this topic focuses mainly on the general community, it is also reflected amongst staff at post-secondary institutions. This information sheet provides complementary information to the [Campus Mental Health Works Empathic Strain session](#).



## Why the shift to empathic strain from compassion fatigue?

The term compassion fatigue was first coined in the late 1990's to reflect a growing concern for healthcare workers exposed and impacted by induced trauma. Over time, many have questioned the notion that compassion is an exhaustible resource. Much like love, humans have been found to have boundless compassion. However, under continued pressure and exposure to their own and others trauma, humans' ability to feel empathy towards others can be strained. In fact, the ability to feel compassion and empathy have different neural pathways. Research also points out that tapping into compassion and learning to grow and harness it, is a key to overcoming this strain. (Tend Academy, 2021)

## Common Definitions

These terms are often used interchangeably and can be related, however there are root differences that should be acknowledged.

**Empathic Strain:** Empathic strain is caused by exposure to occupational stress at higher than normal intensity, due to factors such as increased workload, decreased clinical autonomy, and decreased funding for resources and staffing. It often impacts those in frontline helping professions such as nurses, social workers, and paramedics. It results in physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as a decreased ability to empathize with those who they are helping and or who may be going through a difficult experience. This can have consequences not only for the individual experiencing empathic strain but on those they are trying to support, as individuals experiencing

empathic strain may underreact to events or to individuals seeking support and or comfort from them.

**Secondary traumatization or vicarious trauma:** The change in world view and beliefs that comes from hearing individuals or groups share their experiences of trauma. Often results in individuals feeling increased fear, anxiety and worry to an extent that impacts their daily lives.

**Burnout:** While burnout may cause empathic strain, resulting in decreased motivation and overall emotional and physical exhaustion from occupational stressors, a key difference from empathic strain is it can happen in any profession and is not tied to trauma exposure. Unlike vicarious trauma and empathic strain, burnout is usually resolved more quickly.

## Factors that may lead to empathic strain:

### Environmental contributions:



- Heavy and intense caseloads
- Long working hours
- Limited resources
- Lack of emotional support system at work
- World issues: pandemic, war, acts of terror

### Personal characteristics

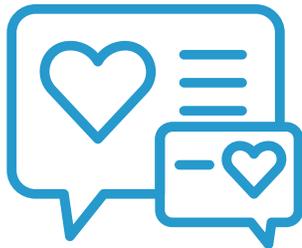
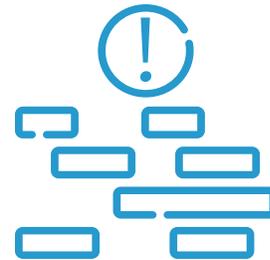


- Highly empathic
- Personal history of trauma
- Personal stress

## Signs of Empathic Strain

Developed by Christina Clarke, Wakeforest School of Medicine

- Exhaustion: Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted and not having the energy to go about regular daily tasks.
- Reduced ability for empathy/sympathy
- Anger, irritability
- Increased substance use
- Dread of working with certain clients
- Lack of enjoyment of work
- Avoidance: urge to isolate from those around you
- Heightened anxiety
- Hypersensitive/insensitivity
- Difficulty making simple decisions
- Absenteeism: Unable to motivate oneself to go to work and or feeling too exhausted to work
- Impact on personal life: Inability to separate work from personal life, bringing the emotional burden of work home. This may have a serious impact on relationships at home.



**Sympathy** involves understanding a situation from your own perspective.

**Empathy** involves understanding a situation from another individual's point of view and understanding the root of why they may be experiencing things in the way they do.

## Protective factors

➤ **Naming it:** In naming our feelings as empathic strain, we can begin to understand the underlying emotions it brings and address them. We need to allow ourselves to recognize what we are going through, and at times to feel the feelings we are going through. Suppressing feelings will not make them go away. Only when we recognize our own experience and name it can we begin the journey towards healing.

➤ **Validating it:** It is important to recognize our feelings and acknowledge them as being important without judgement. At the same time, we can encourage our co-workers to give themselves permission to express their own feelings. When one individual speaks openly, it may create a safe environment for others to speak freely.

➤ **Having awareness of environmental stress:**

Being aware of our environmental stressors -- noise, lights, general work environment -- can play a big part in finding solutions. A biophilic map provides a roadmap for designing your workspace. This is a concept within the building industry that emphasizes increasing building occupant connectivity to the natural environment through direct nature, indirect nature, and space and place conditions. The word “biophilia” was first introduced by Erich Fromm who defined it as, “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive, whether in a person, a plant, an idea or a social group.” In recent years, an increased amount of research has demonstrated that use of biophilic design principles in workspaces can have a positive impact on mood, physical health and overall satisfaction.

➤ **Having a sense of control at work:** While we may not have the ability to control all aspects of our work environment, it is important to focus on those aspects that you can influence. Having more control over our schedules, administrative policies and the predictability of our workload may allow us to have more of a sense of autonomy over our work. Supervisors are encouraged to have open communication and transparency with staff members.

➤ **Having supportive staff:** Developing a collaborative and supportive team is greatly beneficial to not only creating a psychologically safe workplace, but in combatting empathic strain. Clear goals, open communication, and strong leadership are all principles of a supportive team.

➤ **Having a balanced client load:** Reducing exposure to trauma will help mitigate empathic strain. Social support, developing triage systems that allow for a more balanced approach to case assignments, and open communication amongst teams are some of the measures that will provide avenues to a more balanced workload

➤ **De-Briefing:** Fast paced environments may mean skipping regular debriefs and consultations with a supervisor and coworkers. However, that can come at a big price for our own mental health. Ensuring regular de-briefs and quality supervision are scheduled and providing guidelines for reflection are key.

➤ **Redirecting attention to ourselves (self-care)** Time constraints still exist for many of us –work, study and even socializing can result in a hectic schedule for students. Ensuring that there is still time for self-care (however that may look) is key. Taking a walk, exercising, and meditating are all ways we can be kind to ourselves. A sample meditation is available [here](#).

➤ **Working on personal and professional boundaries:** Setting boundaries, be they personal or professional, is an important component of our mental health. Without setting limits, we may find ourselves feeling resentful, frustrated and angry. Basic steps to setting up boundaries include being aware of your own limits and providing clear, upfront communication to those around you. Setting boundaries does not have to be confrontational and can lead to more open and positive relationships.



➤ **Cultivating equanimity (mental calmness):** Equanimity can be defined as a calm mental state or dispositional tendency toward all experiences or objects, regardless of their origin or their affective valence. There is no one magic method to find this state. Some important things to take into account include: starting where you are and reflecting upon your primary objective, taking small steps and incorporating the notion of equanimity into your mindfulness or meditation practice. It can also be helpful to both start and end your day with activities that replenish you. Starting your day with a meditation and ending your workday with a walk, can provide positive “bookends” to a stressful day.

➤ **Practicing self-compassion:** In building our compassion toward others, we must start with being compassionate toward ourselves. We may be more critical of ourselves and speak to ourselves and about ourselves in a harsher manner than we would to others. A simple step forward is practicing positive self-talk.

➤ **Addressing past pain & trauma:** Individuals in helping roles may not have had the opportunity to seek support in addressing their own past trauma. During a crisis, feelings that they have suppressed may re-surface unless they are addressed.

➤ **Limiting social media:** Research has shown that limiting our exposure to social media can have a positive impact on our mental health. You may want to consider deleting apps or using the controls to limit your time spent on them.

➤ **Asking for help:** It is important for us to normalize help seeking behaviour. Reach out to informal and formal supports in your area or contact your Employee Assistance Program. For further support, your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association may be a good place to start.

## References

- Desbordes, G., Gard, T., Hoge, E.A. et al. Moving Beyond Mindfulness: Defining Equanimity as an Outcome Measure in Meditation and Contemplative Research. *Mindfulness* 6, 356–372 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-013-0269-8>
- Guerra, Dan (2015) From Stressed to Centred.
- Highlights from Webinar on Avoiding Compassion Fatigue | Attend, Engage, Invest (wordpress.com).
- Kisling, J. (2020, April 20). The difference between empathy and sympathy. *Psychiatric Medical Care*. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://www.psychmc.com/articles/empathy-vs-sympathy#:~:text=Sympathy%20involves%20understanding%20from%20your,understand%20and%20provide%20healthier%20options>.
- Pearlman, L. A., & Saakvitne, K. W. (1995). *Trauma and the therapist: Countertransference and vicarious traumatization in psychotherapy with incest survivors*. W W Norton & Co.
- Why It Is Time to Stop Using “Compassion Fatigue” | TEND (tendacademy.ca); <https://www.healthing.ca/news/industry-news/policy-government/compassion-fatigue-healthcare-workers/>